

River Rats return home

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The River Rats are back.

About 170 soldiers from the 36th Engineer Brigade's 74th Multi-Role Bridging Company, 20th Engineer Battalion returned to Fort Hood Tuesday night.

The next day, about 250 from the 59th and 572nd Mobility Augmentation companies returned.

All three units spent 15 months in Iraq, conducting anything from route clearance missions to Iraqi Army training to emplacing bridges.

Among the 74th Multi-Role soldiers, affectionately called the River Rats, to return Tuesday night was Staff Sgt. Stephen Kama. He's a mechanic who has served three Iraq tours.

This was a tough deployment because it was extended from 12 to 15 months, said Stephen's wife, Marina. She was just one of the many family members who waited at Starker Physical Fitness Center on Tuesday night for their soldiers to walk in the door.

Of the nine years Stephen and Marina have lived in Texas, Stephen has been home only four years. That included an 18-month tour to Korea.

Stephen is from Micronesia, a group of islands between the Philippines and Hawaii, and Marina is from Palau, a group of islands just east of the Philippines.

Though the 15-month deployment was hard, Marina encouraged her husband to stay strong. They overcame a lot during the separation, and Marina said it only made them stronger.

Many say that the hardest place to be during a deployment is back home, Marina said. She doesn't agree.

"What they went through is nothing compared to what we went through," she said. "We have to give them a lot of credit." She thanked her husband for his hard work and being courageous enough to endure 15 months in combat. Stephen had to deal with a lot more than just his deployment.



Marina's mother had a stroke in August, and Stephen was allowed to come to Palau for three days to help her through the emergency. Though it sounded simple, a trip to Palau was no small feat. It took 18 hours to get there from Texas, Marina said.